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SUBJECT: ZAGREB WEEKLY ACTIVITY REPORT - APRIL 30, 2008

1. (U) HDZ LEADERSHIP REMAINS VIRTUALLY UNCHANGED:

The April 26 General Convention of the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) confirmed the hold of Prime Minister Ivo Sanader over his party. Sanader, Deputy Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor, and the leadership slate of ten candidates all ran unopposed for the positions of party president, deputy president, and executive board, respectively. The only competition was among the 39 candidates for the 25 Central Committee positions chosen by the Convention. Among all positions current and former ministers predominated, with little sign of new blood or fresh faces for the party. The predictability the convention led Croatia's leading political weekly "Gloбус" to describe it as "a great triumph of the personality cult," showing that "delegates can vote but can't choose." In his address, the new-old party president, Ivo Sanader -- now due to lead the HDZ for the next four years -- cited the invitation to Croatia to join NATO and the ongoing EU accession talks as foreign policy successes. Blaming global economic conditions, he also said he expected annual economic growth to be 4 percent; significantly lower than the 7 percent announced during the election campaign last year. (ZTomic)

2. (SBU) PARLIAMENT CREATES NEW COMMITTEE FOR DEFENSE POLICY, WITH OPPOSITION CHAIR:

In its last session, the Croatian parliament (or Sabor) adjusted its committee structures, reportedly in an attempt to make them match up better with the structure of the government. Among the most important changes was to adopt an initiative from opposition MP, and former Presidential Chief of Staff, Boris Sprem to establish a separate committee for defense affairs. Defense issues had previously been covered as part of the Sabor Committee on Internal Affairs and National Security. Proponents of the change argue that the split will allow both the Defense Committee and the National Security Committee to do a better job overseeing, respectively, the Ministry of Defense and the country's law enforcement/intelligence agencies. Even Ranko Ostojic, chair of the National Security Committee that is losing some powers, supports the change, even more so since both he and new Defense committee chair Sprem are members of the opposition Social Democratic Party. Since Sprem's previous boss, President Stipe Mesic, has been among the most vocal critics of alleged corruption in defense procurements, expectations are that one focus of the new committee's work will be to look at those issues. (RHoltzapple)

3. (U) STUDENT PROTESTS FORCE POSTPONEMENT OF NATIONAL EXAMS:

Thousands of Croatian high school students marched in cities around the country on April 28 to protest the planned administration of Croatia's first national graduation exams. Students, and some teachers, complained that the test, intended to survey a student's knowledge base from all four years of high school, had been poorly developed with no guidance for teachers on how to prepare their students, and

without proper coordination with domestic universities. The protesters, who organized themselves primarily using internet and SMS messages, successfully demanded a meeting with Education Minister Primorac, after which the minister postponed implementation of the test for one year to give more time to address the issues raised. Score one for people power. (RHoltzapple)
Bradtke